

## THE STRANGE STORY OF OUR VILLA.

BY M. E. PENN.

“‘VILLA de l'Orient, Avenue des Citronniers, Nice’—really, our address looks uncommonly well at the head of a letter,” remarked Mrs. Brandon, contemplating, with her head on one side, the effect of the words she had just written.

“It really does,” we agreed in chorus. We always agreed with Mrs. Brandon; it saved trouble.

We were three “lone-lorn” females—two spinsters and a widow—who had agreed to share a house—or, rather, part of a house, for we occupied but one story—at Nice for the winter.

First there was Mrs. Brandon—our chaperon, housekeeper, and directress in chief—tall, blonde, majestic, with a calm, suave manner, and a quietly distinct voice, which always made itself heard and obeyed; then came Miss Lucy Lester, a plump, good-tempered little lady of a certain age, with a round, smiling face, kindly blue eyes, and not an angle about her, either moral or physical. Lastly there was the present writer, who modestly prefers to leave her portrait to the reader’s imagination, trusting that he will paint it in the most attractive colours at his disposal.

The supplementary members of the party were Mrs. Brandon’s daughter Georgie, an over-grown school-girl of thirteen; Georgie’s inseparable companion, “Chum,” a small, sharp, and extremely impudent fox-terrier; and Joséphine, our stout French *bonne*, who inhabited a microscopic kitchen, which her capacious person entirely filled.

In spite of its name there was nothing in the least Oriental about the appearance of “our villa.” It was simply a good-sized, square, pink-and-white house, looking, Georgie said, as if it were built of *nougat*, with green balconies and shutters, and a semi-circular flight of steps to the front door. It stood in the midst of an extensive garden, planted with orange and lemon trees, and sheltered on one side by a rocky hill, which rose above it, sheer and straight, like a natural wall. At the end of the garden was a rustic bench, sheltered by a gnarled old olive-tree.

The house was furnished with remarkable taste. The house-agent, through whom we took our *appartement*, informed us that the landlord, M. de Valeyre—a gentleman of good birth, though not of large means, who was now on a shooting tour in Corsica—had spent many years of his life in the East, and our rooms contained not a few souvenirs of his travels in the shape of ornaments, rugs, and

draperies, to say nothing of his own clever oil-sketches of Oriental life and scenery which adorned the walls.

The rooms, though decidedly small, were bright and airy, and the outlook on the garden, where the oranges were ripening under their glossy leaves, delightful. Altogether we felt we might congratulate ourselves on our good fortune.

"Yes," proceeded our "chief," glancing complacently around her—we were sitting in the dining-room after lunch on the third day of our arrival—"it is really a *trouvaille*. So charmingly situated, so well furnished, and so cheap! We might have looked all over Nice and found nothing to suit us so well."

"We might, indeed," assented Lucy Lester, who generally echoed the last speaker. "One could wish, perhaps, that the bedrooms were a little larger——"

"And that they did not open one out of the other like a nest of boxes, of which mine is the inside box," I ventured to add.

Mrs. Brandon glanced at me austere over her eyeglass.

"If we, whom you disturb by passing through our rooms, do not object to that, I think *you* need not," she observed reprovingly.

"But it seems you do object," I returned. "Every morning I am greeted with anathemas 'not loud, but deep,' half smothered under the bed-clothes."

"Why will you persist in getting up at such unearthly hours, waking people out of their beauty sleep?"

"I don't mind that," put in Georgie, who was teaching Chum to balance a pencil on his nose; "but I do wish the woman upstairs would not make such a noise at night; I can't go to sleep for her. The ceilings are so thin, one hears every sound."

"The woman upstairs?" her mother repeated. "What do you mean, child? There is no one in the house but ourselves. The upper stories and the ground floor are unlet."

"There is some one in the room above mine all the same," Georgie persisted. "She keeps me awake by walking about overhead, sometimes muttering and laughing to herself, and sometimes sobbing as if her heart would break. Last night I stood up on the bed and rapped the ceiling with my umbrella to silence her, but she kept on all the same. Chum heard her too—didn't you, sir?"

Chum, glad of any interruption to his lesson, barked an emphatic assent.

"Well, now, that is very strange," Miss Lester remarked, dropping her knitting. "I have fancied, myself, do you know, that I heard some one moving about, overhead; not only at night, but in the daytime."

"Perhaps there is some servant or caretaker left in charge of the rooms," Mrs. Brandon said after a pause; "I will ask M. Gillet when next I see him."

We saw M. Gillet, the house-agent, the following day. He called,

as he explained politely, to ask after the health of "these ladies," and to ascertain if we were satisfied with our "installation."

He was a round, fat, oily man of middle age, with a bland manner and a propitiatory smile.

"We are quite well and perfectly satisfied," Mrs. Brandon replied graciously, answering for us all, as usual. "But I thought you told us, M. Gillet, that the upstairs rooms were unoccupied?"

"So they are, madame. There is no one in the house but yourselves and your servant."

"Then who is it my daughter hears at night in the room above hers?" He raised his eyebrows, glancing inquiringly at Georgie.

"I hear a woman walking about and talking to herself," she explained. "I can't understand what she says; it is not French."

"Ah!" His face changed from smiling incredulity to startled gravity. He drew in his lips and looked perturbed.

"It must be Madame de Valeyre," he muttered; "it can be no one else. Just like her to turn up again in this mysterious fashion without a word of warning! Monsieur will be furious when he knows she is here, and I shall certainly think it my duty to inform him at once."

"Are you speaking of our landlord's wife?" I inquired. He assented.

"But why should he be displeased? Has she not a right to occupy her own house?"

"Well—no—that is just it. When they separated by mutual consent a year ago it was expressly stipulated, as a condition of his making her an allowance, that she should not return here, or in any way molest him. I had it from his own lips."

"Why did they separate?" Miss Lester inquired, curiously.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"'Incompatibility of temper' was the reason given, but, of course, there were others. The fact is, it was one of those madly romantic marriages which never do turn out well—except in novels. She was an Arab girl whom he picked up somewhere in Algeria, and insisted on marrying, to the scandal of his family and friends—that is her portrait," he added, nodding towards a picture on the wall; "painted by Monsieur himself, soon after his marriage."

We looked with interest at the canvas; a slight but clever oil-sketch of a young Arab girl, with an oval olive-tinted face of striking beauty, and strange passionate dark eyes with a smouldering fire in their depths. Under it was written "Ayesha," and a date.

"Yes, she was handsome, then," he admitted, in answer to our comments, "but half a savage, and more than half a heathen, though supposed to have been converted. I heard that in the early days of their marriage she spent most of her time concocting charms and potions 'to keep her husband's love.' Apparently they were not the right sort," he added drily; "he soon wearied of her; then there were

scenes, tears, upbraidings. Madame was jealous—(with cause, if report spoke truly); Monsieur had a temper—*enfin*, no one was surprised when, just a year ago, M. de Valeyre announced that they had separated by mutual consent, and that Madame had returned to her friends. Since then he has been travelling, and no doubt is much happier without her.”

“While she, poor soul, is fretting her heart out,” Mrs. Brandon put in; “though I have no doubt he was a brute to her.”

The agent shrugged his shoulders with a deprecating smile.

“There were faults on both sides, Madame; but it was hardly possible for any man to live in peace with such a *toquée* as she is.”

“*Toquée?*” Mrs. Brandon repeated; “do you mean that she is mad? If so, it is certainly not pleasant to have her in the house.”

“*Mais non, Madame!*” he protested; “she is not mad; only eccentric, erratic, capricious. Her returning in this mysterious way is a proof of it. Of course I have no right to interfere with her, but I shall certainly let M. de Valeyre know at once that she is here. You must not be subjected to this annoyance.”

After a few more words he took his leave.

The days that followed were fully and pleasantly occupied in exploring Nice and its environs, which were new to all of us. We sunned ourselves on the Promenade des Anglais; drove on the Cornice Road; heard the band in the Jardin Public, and loitered among the tempting shops on the Place Masséna; all in due course. The weather was glorious. Sunny days and moonlit nights succeeded each other in uninterrupted splendour, and made it difficult for us to believe that we were actually within a few weeks of Christmas.

The presence of the mysterious Madame de Valeyre in the house was no longer a matter of doubt. Not only had we all heard her restless footsteps overhead, and the unintelligible muttering which sounded so strangely uncanny, but more than once we had caught sight of her—a tall slender figure clad in a loose white wrapper—pacing to and fro in the shadowy garden alleys, or sitting on the bench under the gnarled old olive-tree. Once, at dusk, I met her on the stair-case flitting silently upstairs to her own lonely rooms, but she passed me quickly without returning my salutation, or even glancing at me.

“*C'est drôle!*” Joséphine often remarked; “to shut herself up like that, without even a servant. And how does she get her food? she never seems to go beyond the gates.”

We agreed that it *was* “drôle,” but did not trouble ourselves greatly about the matter, having more interesting occupation for our thoughts.

One evening, in the third week of our tenancy, the others were gone to the theatre, and I, pleading letters to write, had remained at home with no companion but “Chum,” having given Joséphine permission to go out.

Chum, by the way, was the only one of the party who did not appear to like his winter quarters. He had not been in his usual rude health and spirits since we came to the Villa, but seemed restless and depressed. Even now, as he lay curled up on my gown, he could not sleep quietly, but kept waking up with a start and a shiver, looking uneasily about him.

I sat in the dining-room, out of which the other rooms opened. To the right was the curtained doorway (doors there were none) of the *salon*—to the left, that which admitted to Mrs. Brandon's bed-room, leading out of which was Miss Lester's. The dressing-room of the latter had been converted into a bed-room for Georgie, and the last of the suite was my own chamber.

The evening was warm and very still. Glancing through the open window, which was shaded by a tall eucalyptus, I caught a glimpse of a sky full of stars, and over the tree-tops a line of tremulous silver showed where the sea lay sleeping.

As I lowered my head to my writing again, my eye was arrested by a slight movement of the *portière* which screened the drawing-room doorway. I looked up quickly, but seeing nothing unusual, concluded I had been mistaken. I was writing busily again, when the dog stirred uneasily, growled, then suddenly sprang to his feet, gazing, with dilated eyes and ears erect, towards the door. As I involuntarily looked again in the same direction, I was startled to see a hand, the long slender hand of a woman, put forth from within to draw the curtain back. For a moment it remained motionless, grasping the *portière*, and I had time to note every detail of its form and colour; the fine but dusky skin, the delicate taper fingers, on one of which gleamed a quaint snake-shaped gold ring. Then the curtain was abruptly withdrawn, and a figure appeared in the opening: a tall, slender woman, enveloped in a loose wrapper of some gauzy Algerian stuff.

It was Madame de Valeyre. I had never had a full view of her face before, but I recognised her at once as the original of the portrait: thinner, older, with a wild and troubled look in her lovely dark eyes, but the same.

Too startled to speak, I stared at her, and she looked back as silently and as fixedly at me. Then, before I could rise or address her, my strange visitor crossed the room with a calm and leisurely step, and passed through the opposite doorway.

Recovering from my surprise, I caught up the lamp and followed her. She had already traversed Mrs. Brandon's bedroom, and was passing into the one beyond.

"Pardon, Madame——" I called after her; but she neither paused nor turned till she reached the threshold of my own room, the inner one of the suite.

Drawing back the *portière* with one hand, she looked at me over her shoulder—a look that thrilled me, so earnest it was, so imperious, so fraught with meaning to which I had not the clue—but uttered

not a word. Then she passed in, and the heavy curtain dropped behind her.

In a second's space I had followed her into the room.

To my utter astonishment she was not there. I looked round blankly, raising the lamp above my head. There was no other door but that by which she had entered ; no closet, no cupboard, no recess in which she could be concealed. And yet she was gone, vanished, it seemed, into thin air. For a moment I stood, looking about me in utter bewilderment ; then a sort of panic seized me—an irrational fear of I knew not what or whom.

I hurried back through the empty and silent rooms, not daring to cast a glance behind me ; and feeling a sudden distaste for the dining-room, took refuge in the tiny kitchen, where I sat with Chum on my lap, starting nervously at every sound, till the others returned.

I had decided to say nothing of what had occurred to Miss Lester or Georgie, lest it should alarm them, but Mrs. Brandon I must tell, for the relief of my own mind, though I hardly expected she would believe my story. In fact it seemed, even to myself, so incredible that I could well excuse her scepticism.

It was as I anticipated. She heard me out with a look of mingled astonishment and incredulity.

"My dear Edith," she said when I had finished ; "excuse me, but—are you quite sure you did not fall asleep and dream all this ?"

"I am quite sure that I was as wide awake then as I am now."

"But it is so utterly unaccountable," she objected ; "not only her disappearance, but her appearance. How did she get into the drawing-room in the first instance ? She was not there when we went out I am certain, and she could not have entered it afterwards without your seeing her. Why did you not ask her what she wanted—what she meant by it ?"

"I was too startled at first, and when I recovered myself she had vanished."

"Well, I hope I shall encounter her myself," Mrs. Brandon remarked resolutely ; "she shall not 'vanish' again till she has explained the matter, I promise you. We can't have her prowling about our rooms like a Banshee."

But the days passed on, and we caught no further glimpse of Madame de Valeyre.

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It was the last day of the old year—a day so brilliant, so warm, serene, and sunny, that it would not have disgraced an English mid-summer. Long after Georgie had retired for the night, we three elders sat round the handful of wood fire which we kept in more for the sake of cheerfulness than warmth, talking of old times, old friends and old scenes, in that retrospective mood which falls on most of us at such seasons.

"I wonder if that poor woman upstairs will have any one to wish

her '*Bonne Année*' to-morrow?" Miss Lester remarked during a pause in the conversation. "Fancy how *triste* to be spending New Year's Eve alone! I thought I heard her crying just now."

We listened, and sure enough a sound of suppressed sobbing, inexpressibly sad and forlorn, reached us from the room above.

"Poor soul!" Mrs. Brandon exclaimed compassionately. "I feel strongly inclined to go upstairs and see if there is anything I can do to help or comfort her, but there is no knowing how she might take it. She is evidently more than a little *toquée*, as M. Gillet told us. If that husband of hers——"

She left the sentence unfinished, and we all started as a sound of wheels reached us, coming rapidly up the garden drive, and stopping at the door. The next moment there was a loud peal at the bell.

"Who can it be at this hour? it is past eleven o'clock!" I exclaimed.

"Perhaps it is Monsieur de Valeyre," Lucy Lester suggested suddenly. I rose, and, cautiously opening the window, glanced down into the garden. The moonlight showed me a tall man's figure just alighting from a *fiacre*, the driver of which was handing down a gun-case and a portmanteau.

"It is our landlord, sure enough," I said, closing the window. "Monsieur Gillet's information has brought him home, I suppose. I hope there will be no 'scene' upstairs."

"Dear me, I hope not!" Lucy echoed; though the anticipated excitement seemed not altogether unpleasing to her.

"He is evidently not remarkable for patience," was Mrs. Brandon's comment, as another still louder peal rang though the house. "If Madame does not choose to admit him one of us must go down. Joséphine is in bed long ago."

I volunteered for the task, and, Lucy offering to accompany me, we descended, noisily escorted by Chum.

The *fiacre* was driving away as we opened the door, and the visitor stood on the step, looking out at the moonlit garden.

He turned, and, expecting no doubt to see a servant, was beginning an impatient exclamation at the delay, but checked himself on perceiving us.

"A hundred pardons, Mesdames, for disturbing you at this untimely hour," he said, raising his hat; "but I have only just arrived from Corsica. I am Monsieur de Valeyre," he added.

I bowed, and drew back to admit him, trying in vain to silence Chum, whose bark was now exchanged for a low, angry growl.

The visitor was a tall, well-built, bronze-complexioned man of six or seven and thirty, with a face which would have been strikingly handsome but for its worn and haggard look, and something repellent in the expression of the bold dark eyes.

"Your dog objects to strangers, apparently," he said, with a glance of no great favour at the terrier, who responded with a snarl which showed all his little sharp white teeth.

"He is a capital watch-dog," I said, apologetically; "he would soon let us know if there were thieves in the house."

"Ah, that reminds me——" He turned as he spoke, to put up the door-chain. "I hear from Gillet, my agent, that you were alarmed on your arrival by strange noises in the upper rooms. Do they still continue?"

"We were not alarmed exactly, but they puzzled us till we knew that Madame de Valeyre had returned."

He let fall the door-chain and turned to look at me.

"Madame de Valeyre?" he repeated.

"Yes; did not M. Gillet tell you, Monsieur, that she was here?"

"He told me you had said so, but I could not believe it; I cannot believe it now. She—my wife—is with her family at Algiers, and it is not likely she would have returned without letting me know."

"She is in the house at this moment," I said, quietly; "she has been here for the last month. We have not only heard but seen her repeatedly—have we not?" I added, turning to my companion, who echoed, "Repeatedly!"

He looked from one to the other of us with a frown, but said nothing; and, having secured the fastening of the door, took up his portmanteau and followed us upstairs.

"May I ask you to lend me your light for a moment?" he said, when we reached the landing; "I will return it presently."

Nearly a quarter of an hour elapsed before he descended. We heard him going from room to room, opening and shutting doors and windows, but no sound of voices reached us.

At last he reappeared at the open door of our sitting-room, candle in hand. Mrs. Brandon herself went forward to take it from him, looking at him scrutinizingly as she did so.

"Many thanks, Madame," he said, relinquishing it to her with a bow. Then, turning to me, he added, coldly: "You were mistaken in supposing that my wife had returned. There is no living creature in the rooms upstairs, nor have they been entered since I left them."

"But we have seen her——" I began.

"Whoever you may have seen, it was certainly not my wife," was his reply.

Before I could speak again, he added:

"I have the honour to wish you good-evening, Mesdames," and, with a comprehensive bow which included us all, he left the room.

We looked at each other bewilderedly. What did it mean? What had become of the woman?

"She must have heard his voice, and hidden herself somewhere, in fear of him," Miss Lester suggested.

"Depend upon it, she has reason to fear him," Mrs. Brandon remarked. "He looks like a man who would use his power mercilessly. It is dreadful to think of that poor half-demented creature being left unprotected to his anger, perhaps violence."



Lucy Lester drew her shawl closer round her with a shiver.

"I feel as if something terrible was going to happen," she said nervously.

The same uneasy presentiment weighed on my own mind, together with some other shadowy fear which I could not have put into words.

Feeling too anxious and excited to go to bed, we gathered round the fire again, talking in whispers, and listening apprehensively to every sound from above. For a time we heard M. de Valeyre moving about ; then there was silence, only interrupted when the time-piece, chiming midnight, reminded us to wish each other a Happy New Year.

After that I must have fallen into a doze, from which I was roused by a touch on my arm.

"Edith," Mrs. Brandon whispered, "do you hear?"

I started and sat upright, looking about me in the confusion of a sudden awakening. "What is it?" I asked.

Keeping her hand on my arm, she pointed upwards. The light restless footsteps we had grown to know so well, were once more pacing to and fro overhead, and we heard the low intermittent murmur of a woman's voice. Suddenly it was interrupted by a cry—a man's hoarse cry of mortal anguish or terror, such as I trust I may never hear again.

Mingling with the cry, came a peal of eldritch laughter, then the sound of a struggle, and a heavy fall which shook the house.

"Come, or there will be murder done," Mrs. Brandon exclaimed, and she hurried from the room and upstairs, followed by Miss Lester and myself.

We found the outer door of M. de Valeyre's apartments closed, but not locked, and passing through the ante-chamber, entered the first room of the suite. A lamp on the chimney-piece showed that it was in strange disorder ; the furniture displaced, the carpet upturned, the cloth half-dragged from the table.

Its only present occupant was the master of the house, who crouched against the wall at the further end, in an attitude of abject terror.

Never while I live shall I forget the face he turned towards us when we entered. With strained dilated eyes, and parted lips, it looked like an image of incarnate Fear. I stopped short over the threshold, feeling a shrinking reluctance to enter, but Mrs. Brandon without hesitation advanced to his side.

"What is the matter? what has happened?" she asked.

He looked at her vaguely, but seemed incapable of uttering a word, and put his hand to his throat as if suffocating. There was a carafe of brandy on the table. She filled a liqueur glass and held it to his lips. Presently he drew a deep sobbing breath, and half raised himself, glancing round the room with a haggard look of dread.

"Is she—gone?" he asked hoarsely.

"There is no one here but ourselves," Mrs. Brandon replied. "You——" She broke off, recoiling from him with a stifled cry.

He had started convulsively, and was gazing with a look of speechless terror at some object on the opposite side of the room. Involuntarily we followed the direction of his eyes, but to us nothing was visible.

"There she is—look!" he gasped. "My wife—dead, yet living. Keep her from me—keep her hands from my throat! Ayesha—mercy—pardon! Oh, Heaven."

He crouched against the wall again, putting out both hands to repel some invisible assailant; struggling desperately as if with an actual bodily antagonist, and apparently using all his strength to keep the murderous fingers from his throat.

Mrs. Brandon had fled from him in a panic, and we all three stood on the threshold, watching with horror-struck eyes that ghastly struggle. It did not last long. With a dreadful choking cry he dropped his arms; his whole figure collapsed and fell in a heap, face downwards, on the floor.

Strangely enough my fear had now utterly passed away. While the others hesitated I approached him and lifted his head, and turned his face to the light. After one glance I laid it down again with a shudder. "Has he fainted again?" they asked me. "He is dead," I answered, as I rose.

Yes, he was dead; but *how* had he died? What was the meaning of those livid finger-marks, which, for a moment, I had seen plainly printed on his throat? That is a mystery which has never been solved.

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The sudden death of the master of the Villa de l'Orient caused a sensation in Nice, where he was well known, and it was intensified by a rumour that Madame de Valeyre had mysteriously disappeared. There was no trace of her recent presence in the house, and it was ascertained that her relatives in Algeria had had no news of her for more than a year. Some other facts came to light which threw a sinister suspicion on the dead man. Search was made in the garden and grounds, and finally her body was discovered buried under the old olive-tree. An Algerian scarf, tightly knotted round her throat, showed what had been the manner of her death.

It need hardly be said that we took flight as soon as possible from the ill-omened house, which was shortly afterwards demolished by order of the Valeyre family, so that not a vestige now remains of what we once called "our villa."